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Special Briefing

The Dilution Dilemma: Making Your Messages Matter

by Mark Sanborn, CSP, CPAE

As a leader, do you ever feel your important messages fall on deaf ears?

Do your carefully constructed and communicated strategies always get implemented?

Are you often frustrated by the difference between the results you ask of others and what you actually get?

Leaders agonize when developing vision, mission and strategy. They carefully choose words and phrases. They painstakingly craft spoken and written communication to explain these important concepts. They communicate these messages in countless conversations and presentations.

Yet if you asked the typical employee what their leader's message is-what is truly important and how it should shape their decisions, actions and interactions-they'd be hard pressed to provide more than a vague summary.

Why?

The answer: The Dilution Dilemma. By the time the message is passed down or through the organization, the clarity, effectiveness and impact are dramatically diluted.

What can you do to minimize or eliminate this costly dilution?

The antidote can be summarized by these four words: constant, clear, catchy and compelling.

Constant. The best messaging loses effectiveness when it changes. The more often messaging changes, the less believable future messaging becomes.

Repetition is the mother of both retention and understanding. When followers hear the same messages repeatedly they realize there must be a reason, and the reason is *importance*. Often the first time a message is heard it is ignored or discounted. Why? Employees assume they'll hear it again if it really is significant. They are used to fleeting ideas and concepts and have learned to tune out those that aren't emphasized.

Constant communication of the same messages can be a crazy maker for leaders but it is necessary nonetheless. You need to stick to you messaging until you are sick and tired of repeating it. Only at the point of near nausea can you safely assume the message has



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been heard, understood and believed to be important.

The messages you send as a leader will be repeated less frequently as they move through the organization. That's why you need to front-load the system with constant repetition. A few mentions by leaders at the top get diluted to a miniscule amount of information at the bottom of the org chart.

Clear. Ambiguity is the enemy of success. When people aren't clear on what you mean, they fill in the blanks, and usually incorrectly.

There is a scene in the movie Philadelphia where the character played by Tom Hanks is doing an initial consultation with a lawyer played by Denzel Washington. Although I saw it over twenty years ago, I still recall how the lawyer communicated with the potential client about his situation. He said, "Explain it to me like I'm a second grader." Despite his intellect and skill, he knew only a complete and thorough explanation would provide the information he needed.

And that is clarity. You must cut through the superfluous to find the substantive and communicate it in such a way that there can be no misunderstanding.

Leaders build their messages on irreducible minimums. They know that if they can't succinctly explain what they mean, they won't be understood by others. Recall the childhood game of telephone where a statement is passed by whispering to another which they in turn whisper to another. Within a few of these "transmissions" the content of the original message has completely morphed. This is yet another effect of the dilution dilemma.

Don't tell people you're explaining it like they're second graders, but be just as clear and thorough as if you were.

The end result you need as a leader is not mere acceptance and understanding but action. Be clear on what people must do as a result of what you're telling them. You can't insinuate what needs to be done; clarity requires a call to action.

Catchy. Your audience is bombarded with messages in every conceivable medium. Being catchy is about breaking through the clutter and being memorable.

What about your message will stick in the mind of the reader or hearer? Here's the test: will they be able to accurately convey what you've communicated? Your job as a leader is to make their job of understanding and repeating easy. More importantly, catchy messages make us want to repeat them. We all love the catchy and the clever and quickly tire of the mundane.



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Stories, metaphors, analogies, mottos and even clichés are among the tools you can use. Spend as much time in the packaging of what you're trying to convey as you do developing the content of the message.

Remember, facts validate, but stories illustrate. The best statistical analysis in the world will be diluted to the point of nothingness if it isn't packaged in a catchy, memorable story or illustration.

Compelling. The ultimate guard against dilution is to make your important messages compelling. People can be clear and able to act on the information but they won't without reasons that make sense to them. That is the essence of creating compelling message: getting people to care enough to do something. Compelling ideas are powerful; they have the ability to induce action.

And that requires emotion. Take it from two experts in the field, Dan and Chip Heath, authors of *Made to Stick*: "A credible idea makes people believe. An emotional idea makes people care."

Leaders tend to have credible ideas but often stop short of compelling ideas. A leader knows why action should be taken, but that familiarity can prevent them from thinking through the reasons others need to follow through.

To avoid dilution, answer the question lingering in the listener's mind: "Why should I care?" That is a more effective question than "Why is this important?"

Ideas must be robust to be strong and withstand the almost inevitable affects of the dilution dilemma. As a leader, the strength of your ideas and messages comes from constant and clear communication that is designed to be catchy and compelling.

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